

WASHINGTON NEWS



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., right, and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, left. Grassley called in his chits with McConnell, part of a campaign to get a criminal justice overhaul passed.

McConnell under intense pressure from both parties to advance prison reform

By NICHOLAS FANDOS  
NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON – In the past three years, Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, blocked a Democratic Supreme Court nominee for more than a year, pushed through an army of conservative judges and helped cement a conservative Supreme Court by securing confirmation of the most controversial high court nominee in a generation.

All of that has come at great personal cost, so the 85-year-old Iowan had some chits to call in when Monday morning he joined a private phone call with Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the majority leader, to discuss a bipartisan breakthrough to overhaul the criminal justice system and the nation's sentencing rules.

I have been there for you, Grassley told McConnell, the man standing in the way of a quick vote on the measure. And I would hope this is something that you would help me make happen, according to three people familiar with the call who were not authorized to publicly discuss the conversation.

The direct lobbying by Grassley was just part of a pressure campaign aimed squarely at McConnell this week as an unusual coalition of senators, conservative advocacy groups and White House officials press to change the nation's sentencing and prison laws. With President Trump supportive of the effort and Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., pledging to move it through the House, they increasingly view the Senate majority leader as the lone obstacle to unwinding some of the federal

tough-on-crime policies of the 1980s and 1990s.

Now top White House officials, Trump family members, Republican senators and allies of billionaire activists Charles and David Koch are working to get Dr. No to a yes.

"I've been working on this issue for nearly eight years, and we have never been closer than we are right now," said Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, who joined Grassley on the Monday call. "The stars have just aligned in such a way, all it takes is getting to the Senate floor."

Proponents of the bill, known as the First Step Act, fear McConnell will let the short window for consideration this year slide shut rather than bring up for a vote a complicated issue that divides Republicans. His allies insist that those fears are misplaced and that McConnell will make a decision based on factors he has already stated publicly: How much Republican support the bill secures and how it fits in with other must-pass legislation.

So Republican senators allied with Grassley, including Lee, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Tim Scott of South Carolina, began working over wavering colleagues by phone. Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and a leading advocate of the legislation, convened a call with business groups to praise the changes, and the White House circulated a USA Today op-ed that Kushner wrote with Thomas J. Philipson, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers. Donald Trump Jr. and Ivanka Trump, the president's eldest son and daughter, blasted supportive messages to their millions of

Twitter followers urging Congress to move quickly.

Kushner plans to ask Trump to lobby McConnell directly by phone, but is waiting to line up more Republican support first, according to two people familiar with his thinking.

Outside advocacy groups have largely focused on Kentucky, where McConnell is up for re-election in two years. Justice Action Network, which supports the overhaul, is digitally targeting conservative voters in the state. So is FreedomWorks, a Tea Party-aligned conservative group, whose online targeting had driven 10,000 calls of support to McConnell's office in the last few days.

"We are going to keep up the pressure on him to make sure he is good on his word," said Jason Pye, vice president of legislative affairs for FreedomWorks.

The state's junior Republican senator, Rand Paul, and his wife, Kelley, were saturating the Kentucky airwaves to make the case directly to McConnell's constituents.

"I would just ask Mitch McConnell to look at the people who are coming at this from all walks of life and hear all of our voices saying we want this legislation," Kelley Paul said in an interview.

But McConnell is also getting pressure from Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., the leader of a small but powerful bloc of conservatives deeply opposed to any sentencing changes or early release provisions that could free jailed criminals. Cotton has argued that senators should slow down the process and hold hearings on the bill, which he said amounts to a jailbreak – a traditional watchword in Republican pol-

itics.

Cotton has channeled the support of influential law enforcement groups, including the National Association of Assistant United States Attorneys, which sent another letter to McConnell and the Democratic leader Monday warning that the First Step Act would "subject the public to more crime, not less." Other law enforcement groups support the bill.

The appeals on both sides grew in urgency over the weekend after a New York Times report that McConnell had privately told Trump he did not foresee enough time to bring the bill up for a vote this year, which many viewed as tantamount to killing the measure just as it was gaining momentum.

As intensity on both sides has increased, interparty tensions unusual in the modern Senate have spilled into public. After sparring at a private Republican luncheon last week, Cotton and Lee traded public shots on Twitter on Monday, accusing each other of misrepresenting the facts.

The compromise First Step Act builds on a prison overhaul bill passed by the House this year, adding four changes to federal sentencing laws. It lumps together new funding for anti-recidivism programs meant to prepare prisoners to re-enter society and the expansion of early release credits for inmates. It also reduces some mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenders. Though its effect would be limited to federal prisons and offenses – not state ones – the legislation could affect tens of thousands of current inmates and future offenders, experts believe.

House Dems plan 'aggressive' oversight of gridlocked FEC

By DAVE LEVINTHAL  
AND ASHLEY BALCERZAK  
CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY

WASHINGTON – For most of this decade, Congress has all but ignored the perpetually gridlocked Federal Election Commission, which exists to enforce and regulate the nation's campaign finance laws.

No longer, two Democratic congressional representatives tell the Center for Public Integrity. The FEC is broken and needs fixing, they argue.

"In the next Congress, we will be conducting aggressive oversight and pursuing legislative reform so we can finally have an FEC that's fulfilling its mission of fighting corruption," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., a member and potential chairwoman next year of the Committee on House Administration, which has jurisdiction over the FEC.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., concurred.

"We clearly need to have an oversight hearing on the FEC," said Raskin, also a member of the Committee on House Administration. "We need to shine a spotlight on dysfunction at the FEC."

Whether House Democrats' efforts can go beyond spotlight-shining is unclear: Republicans, who generally oppose strict campaign finance laws and regulations, will next year control the U.S. Senate.

But the prospect of new attention on the FEC comes as Democrats are poised to lead the U.S. House for the first time since 2011 – the most recent year a House committee conducted any kind of FEC oversight hearing – and are primed to widely deploy oversight, investigation and sub-

poena powers that come with such leadership.

(The current Republican-led Committee on House Administration last year flirted with conducting an FEC oversight hearing, but it never followed through.)

FEC Chairwoman Caroline Hunter, a Republican, says she's "always happy to speak to Congress." Vice Chairwoman Ellen Weintraub, a Democrat, concurred: "We welcome the opportunity."

If Lofgren and company summon Hunter and Weintraub, along with Republican Commissioner Matthew Petersen and independent Commissioner Steven Walther, to Capitol Hill, there will likely be much for them to discuss. That's because the FEC's conservative and liberal commissioners disagree on numerous issues concerning election law and money, from defending against foreign incursions to policing digital political advertisements.

Perhaps the thorniest issue of all is "dark money," or secret political cash that can't be traced to a human source. It's nevertheless used by certain nonprofit groups, and increasingly, by lightly regulated super PACs, to advocate for and against political candidates.

The FEC is doing its job, Hunter said. "Political committees register and report with the FEC. Groups that aren't political committees don't have to report all their donors. That's the way the law is written," she said.

But there is another take. "This is a controversial area and one where we disagree," said Weintraub, who believes the FEC should more actively regulate political money.

For convenient home delivery, call 842-1111 or visit [BuffaloNews.com/subscribe](http://BuffaloNews.com/subscribe).

THE BUFFALO NEWS

The Buffalo News (ISSN 0745-2691) is published daily and Sunday at a price of \$339.00 per year by The Buffalo News, Inc., One News Plaza, Buffalo, New York 14240. Periodicals postage paid at Buffalo, N.Y. POSTMASTER: Address changes to THE BUFFALO NEWS, ONE NEWS PLAZA, P.O. BOX 100, BUFFALO, N.Y. 14240

©Vol. CCLXXVII No. 50

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES DEPARTMENT:

Monday-Friday, from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
Saturdays 8-9 a.m. • Sundays 8-11 a.m.  
Erie County (Main Number).....842-1111  
All Other Areas (Toll Free) .....(800) 777-8640

HOME DELIVERY RATES PER MONTH

Daily & Sunday (7 Days).....\$28.25\*  
Thurs., Fri., Sat., Sun.....\$25.50\*  
Sun. Only.....\$19.75\*  
(Rates include full digital access.)

\*The Buffalo News publishes and delivers up to 12 holiday editions to ALL of its subscribers, including New Years, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Holiday editions may not be scheduled for the actual date of the holiday. Some holiday editions are scheduled for the preceding or following weekday. All non-7 day subscriptions will include delivery of the holiday editions. There will be an additional cost equal to that of the newsstand price for that day if the holiday occurs on a day not normally scheduled for delivery. Additionally, all subscriptions may include up to four Premium publications per year. For each Premium publication, you may be charged the equivalent of the newsstand price for that edition.

SINGLE COPY RATES

Daily.....\$1.50  
Sunday.....\$3.50

NEWS DEPARTMENT:

Erie County (Main Number) .....849-4444  
All Other Residents (Toll Free) .....(800) 777-8680

PUBLIC SERVICES:

Back Copies.....849-5506  
General Office .....849-3434

TO PLACE ADVERTISING:

Celebrations Announcements .....856-5555  
Birthdays.....849-4489  
Classified Advertising.....856-5555  
Death Notices.....856-5555  
Obituaries.....849-4109  
Outside Erie County (Toll Free) .....(800) 777-8653  
Advertising Services .....849-3461  
Display Advertising .....849-3411

The Buffalo News accepts VISA, MasterCard, American Express and Discover. To make classified advertising payments call 856-5555. For circulation subscription payments, call 842-1111.

the SUMMIT  
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

We have some of the lowest  
credit card rates in town!

Up to 9.00% APR below the national average.\*

the SUMMIT  
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

VISA

With rates as low as  
**8.50%** APR

Apply today!

800.836.SFCU | [summitfcu.org](http://summitfcu.org)

Clarence Branch | 5641 Transit Road, East Amherst, NY 14051  
Delaware/Hertel Branch | 2290 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14216

\*Source: <https://www.bankrate.com/finance/credit-cards/current-interest-rates.aspx> November 1, 2018. Membership eligibility required. Subject to credit approval. Must be 18 years of age or older to apply. Our Cash Advance Fee is 2% of the cash advance amount and our Foreign Transaction Fee is 1% of the transaction amount in U.S. dollars. APRs range from 8.50% to 18.0%. Your APR will depend on your creditworthiness and will vary with the market based on the Prime Rate. APRs shown are as of November 1, 2018 and are subject to change at any time.

HOMETOWN

WLVL 1340 AM / 105.3 FM

NIAGARA COUNTY'S  
EARLY MORNING NEWS

We are Niagara County's First Choice for local information, with upbeat and friendly commentary on what is happening around us.

Tune in to Paul Oates and News Director Hank Nevins  
Monday – Friday 6am – 9am

Local News and Sports, Time - Saver Traffic, Doppler Radar Weather Forecast, School, Business and Community information, ABC National News

WLVL is in Niagara County, and we love our community as much as you do. We promise to do everything in our power to make Niagara County a better place.

[www.wlvl.com](http://www.wlvl.com)  
Hometown WLVL 1340 AM/ 105.3 FM  
Tune In Today!

BU-12139-36

BU-1602357